

Cultural Collaborative draft is wearisome and unorganized

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It doesn't sing. It doesn't dance. It won't act. It ain't got rhythm. It's a big fat bore.

That's about the best I can say for the first draft of the city's new "community plan for San Antonio's **creative economy**." Dubbed the Cultural Collaborative, its syllabically enriched but nutrient-deprived body fell to the ground last week.

Part of the problem is that the consultants, hired by the city's Office of Cultural Affairs, did a pretty good job of finding out what a lot of San Antonians wanted in a cultural plan, but a poor job of organizing that information in a coherent, useful or meaningful way.

In the first draft, 10 "planning issues" are listed alphabetically, starting with "advocacy and outreach" before establishing what is to be advocated, and why.

The consultants might respond that they do establish what is to be advocated: A "vision" paragraph preceding the advocacy recommendations imagines a "culturally literate citizenry" that recognizes "the importance of arts and culture" and "that actively supports arts and culture." Variants of "arts and culture" appear 10 times in the 10 poorly written "vision" paragraphs - it's absent from a few, but the education "vision" has it three times.

Nowhere to be found is an explanation of what is meant by "arts and culture" or why those terms are always conjoined like Frick and Frack.

(At least the consultants, who come from Los Angeles, were smart enough not to use the term "cultural arts," a linguistic and conceptual abomination that has some currency in San Antonio.) Parts of the report make me wonder what the consultants' local informants have been smoking. For example, the introduction to the section on "arts and cultural infrastructure" says, "The primary infrastructure needs are for support and maintenance of existing facilities, and the continued preservation of historic facilities, rather than the development of new facilities." Baloney. San Antonio has no large venues, and few small ones, that meet contemporary acoustical and production standards for symphonic music, opera or theater.

We have a huge need for well-equipped, well-designed arts venues integrated with lively neighborhood centers distant from downtown.

A few of the draft recommendations are sensible and realistic: The parks department surely needs a state-of-the art portable stage, for example, and I think there's value to be gained from "small business assistance targeted at **creative** businesses."

Some are sensible but unrealistic: No way will San Antonio's voters approve a sales tax add-on for arts support.

Others are vague to incomprehensible: "Develop an urban design master plan" is expanded by "Address the issues of articulating a community vision and identity for San Antonio's built environment, and integrating its historic and contemporary aesthetics."

Huh?

On the whole, the draft suffers from lack of focus - perhaps the inevitable result of assembling too many focus groups.

What is the Big Idea? How do the secondary ideas support the Big Idea?

Cultural planning is the most fundamental kind of planning for a community, because the root level of culture comprises the habits of thought and processes of creation and exchange from which all other aspects of our shared life - and our livelihoods - grow.

The stakes demand a more cogent and artful response than we have seen thus far.
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